(Post)Colonial Passages
(Post)Colonial Passages:

*Incursions and Excursions across the Literatures and Cultures in English*

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

SILVIA ALBERTAZZI, FRANCESCO CATTANI, RITA MONTICELLI, FEDERICA ZULLO

Colonial discourse has contained in ordered and fixed spaces those cultures, lives, and experiences that a rereading of the colonial history has shown to be heterogeneous and fragmented. Colonization imposed rules, territorialisation, and social systems through dispossession and material, epistemic violence, but it also created forms of mutual influence.

The laceration produced by postcoloniality has not only allowed the emergence of what the “word” of the Empire repressed and suppressed, but also entailed a subversive re-vision of colonial histories, geographies, subjectivities, and identities. The (post)colonial condition has unleashed a chain of movements, relocations, and rewritings that have become daily practices in the globalized and neoliberal society. Ethnic, racial, religious, gendered, and sexual identities have been called into question and requested to (re)define, name, and re-name themselves to find new ways to tell their stories/histories. The very term “postcolonial” has triggered well-known controversial debates. Its adoption is significant for a specific cultural politics involving the colonial past, the controversial crisis in the present, and an open perspective towards alternative futures. Consulting literature from a postcolonial perspective is thus a critical, transdisciplinary task involving spatial (dis)connections and time lapses. In this light, postcolonialism is also a cultural and political energy involving theories and cultural productions crossing barriers between disciplines and fields of knowledge.

(Post)Colonial Passages: Incursions and Excursions across the Literatures and Cultures in English intends to analyse the various heterogeneous crossings and the subsequent transformations enacted by colonialism and postcolonialism, not only in terms of subjugations and rebellions, but also openness and hybridization. It is about transgressing spatially and culturally pre-established and pre-determined borders and venturing into previously dismissed or undiscovered lands. (Post)colonial passages are at the same time passages “to,” “from,” and “through,” which
do not lead to a definite transition or a stable positioning. They question the idea of belonging not as a given status but as a precarious one, thus subjected to changes, desires, and subversions.

This volume intends to elaborate literary and visual postcolonialism as a transdisciplinary field of passages that necessarily negotiate diverse yet interrelated cultural fields: geopolitical passages, passages in (cultural) theories, migrations, omitted identities, and multimedia studies.

The section “Geopolitical Passages” involves geographic and cultural migration and interrogates the relationship between centres, peripheries, and margins, redefining space as an ontological element that has informed histories of colonialism and still denounces our times of neo-colonialisms. Geocriticism involves the analysis of spaces of conflict and post-conflict calling for a radical redefinition of geopolitical identities in Europe and the so-called global South. More than in other fields of study, geocriticism has bridged the gap between the study of cultural geography, literature, and politics. The dense, intense track of postcolonialism is shown to be a fragmented, multifaceted spatial distribution of power and knowledge, where the North–South colonial divide has created an ontology of difference. Consequently, postcolonialism, in its interconnection with transcultural studies and geocriticism, opens up spaces for the revelation of intertwined colonial histories towards a political engagement in the reframing and reconsideration of the world.

Cultural theories within a postcolonial perspective are also crucial in the production and reception of literary studies, as they construct critical interpretative models that negotiate between the historical, cultural, and political experiences and their discursive representations. The dialogue between theories and fiction is per se a source of critical thinking. Postcolonial theories, while raised in the surge of activism and political engagement, have given voice to the marginalized and dismissed locations in the social order, reclaiming identity and difference, in all their various declinations, as subject positions connected to power. Theorizing in postcolonial studies means making epistemic violence, biases, and prejudices as well as the overt and occult discriminations of mainstream Western culture visible. In the section “Passages in Theory,” postcolonial theory is considered as a passage into contemporary world literature by showing how all the main topics and themes of cultural studies can be found in it. Calling for a wider rereading of literary studies, postcolonialism requests a critical approach capable of retaining the postcolonial theoretical awareness and engaging with cultural studies, translation, and comparative literature more closely. At the same time, postcolonial theorization and critique should force us to cope with the
necessary transformations that the passages from “one shore to the other” involve for all of us, towards the construction of shared futures.

The diverse forms of migration occurring in colonial and postcolonial times imply the study of the interconnection of migration studies with geocriticism and postcolonial issues, and the reflection on the processes and outcomes of human movements in all of their various manifestations. Literature, poetry, cinema, theatre, and art performances have always been interpreters of people’s and communities’ movements, as well as of their re-location in new, foreign places, unveiling the still-present attitude assumed towards the (so-called) other, usually reduced to recurrent stereotypes and subjected to misinterpretations. The section “Migrations” shows how postcolonial literature and art can foster transgressive views of the world and act as forms of resistance. Fictional texts dealing with migration issues are committed to enlightening the persistence of an imperial paradigm, marking a difference and devising tools for new forms of exploitation. Migration within a postcolonial perspective highlights the cultural, linguistic, and political practices that still enact processes of racialization and control, through the employment of categories such as class, ethnicity, and gender. The humanities today are also entrusted with the task of prompting ethical and political critical reflections on contemporary global dynamics, particularly addressing the questions of placelessness, borders, and inclusion/exclusion. These reflections should enable material transformations.

“Omitted Identities” confronts discourses of identity formation and subjectivity within the contexts of colonialism and cultural and linguistic imperialism, while rereading postcolonial productions. The dominant and normative role of the British colonizer is discussed through the analysis of more hybrid cross-cultural identities, which are disclosed and re-examined in contemporary postcolonial, neo-colonial, and neo-Victorian narratives. It is possible to re-draw imperial geographies in order to make those silenced and oppressed subjectivities claim a presence and affirm their existence and history. The act of performing, inventing, and re-inventing identities both in the past and in today’s cultural practices aims at transgressing sociocultural boundaries in terms of “race” and gender constructions. The emergence of private and collective histories from the colonial past contributes to an ongoing project of human cosmopolitism that struggles against the official, and sometimes arbitrary, versions of history.

Visual studies, in their interconnection with literature, intend to reconsider postcolonialism in its relationship between local and global as a crucial means to understand culture and deconstruct it. The global
circulation and reception of verbal/visual texts through translation, adaptation, reception, and critical debates are especially important in the digital era, since the acceleration of cultural exchange involves crucial themes and thoughts that have been raised especially by postcolonial studies. Re-discussing issues of “race,” class, gender, difference, and otherness at a global level means taking into consideration their diverse transformations, concealments, or hyperbolic re-enactments. The section “Multimedia Passages” implies a theoretical movement between diverse media, made of reciprocal contamination and transformation, as well as the study of recurrent patterns in the representations of a global world where identity and “difference” are often overt and covert forms of racism and sexism.

The essays collected in this volume show how the global world still has to confront many asymmetries in power, wealth, health, ethnicities, recognition of citizenship, and diverse gender “identities”—concerns and issues that postcolonialism has investigated in its continuing work of critical and active engagement. This is the only way to avoid assimilated to new forms of imperialism and neoliberalism.
PART I:

GEOPOLITICAL PASSAGES
Space is that which unfolds itself before your still unspoiled eyes. It is born of an instant perception and aligns itself with the nomadic aspirations of the soul. Space is never fixed; it knows no limits, as it is in itself beyond regulation. If it could be represented, it would take a fluid form. A space that is subject to the law and to stasis would no longer be a space, but something else. In space, what might appear to be a boundary (limes) would merely be a threshold (limen). The same is also true for the horizon, a limen par excellence, which welcomes the daring and asks only to be crossed. It is a challenge to make good use of space, for its lability is as heavy a burden to shoulder as its freedom is exhilarating. It demands respect without ever submitting to routine. Against it, a well-tempered boldness is still the key to success. In fact, nothing requires more of the individual than the space which is formed of the very same material that dreams are made of.

Space, dreams … The question remains as to whether space exists beyond the dream world, where sometimes a person can enter with open eyes. Hardly has the dream dissipated that space seems threatened. Space is at risk of becoming a place, that is a mental construct, or—from a more
resolutely collective perspective—a political construct travelled by the same “striae” that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari mapped out not long ago. The reflex of striating what is smooth is an ancient one. Hardly had Cain abandoned the first Genesiac space when he hurriedly started to build the inaugural city and baptise it in the name of his son, Henoch. In this he simultaneously invented place and city. In doing so, he exhausted his imagination. The irony of this is that place is never already there, insofar as it is the result of a transformation, a crystallization, and an immobilization of space. This fundamental transformation is the only one that place endures, whose ideal is in its faithful preservation. A place is thought to be christened only once, but toponymy, which, when honest, explores the longue durée, shows that a different name—the variation sometimes resulting from a repetition that preserves a simple interstice—corresponds to each stratum of place. The shape of territory is supposed to be set in stone as borders are, and as time passes (or as the wheel of history turns), these are declared hermetic. By definition, place is impervious. Would there then be a kind of hierarchy that would make space the playground of gentle dreamers, and place the territory of serious, forward-thinking people? Nothing is less certain. Certainly, the materiality of place seems as concrete as space is volatile, the sedentariness of the norm as credible as flights of the imagination. I must emphasize that time is not for intellectual speculation; it is not even for financial speculation anymore. Yet space exists above and beyond the individual that it both incorporates and surpasses with all its cosmic energy, while place is a fragile artefact. Standing before a stunned Polonius, Hamlet, an equivocal dreamer, soon spots a weasel, a camel, or a whale in the clouds that pass above his head, as if to tauntingly highlight the failings of the soul and its surroundings: what is a place or a territory if not a camel which can also be a weasel, or why not even a whale? Named and delineated as it is, place is nothing other than a fortuitous accumulation of clouds reminding us of an impermanent world. Place is connected to man and to woman, while space goes on without them, as it began without them. Fragile in appearance only, it is an absolute. It is that which will remain, come what may. A post-human reading of the dichotomy between space and place is useful here. Geocriticism can be of assistance in promoting this initiative. Ecocriticism is itself not far off from this perspective, for ecology is at its basis and space is inherent to ecology, much more than place is, which although is not off limits is at most only accommodated by it. From where he stands, Hamlet makes for a masterclass, especially if he had to philosophize on post-humanism while holding a skull in the palm of his hand. Space is the most favourable environment for artistic practice. It is
the territory of nothing at all, if not perhaps the place of stories, which frolic on impulse, and the enlightened works of contemporary art, which grope in the darkness for truth—the groping gesture being the deepest and most honest expression of the aesthetic quest into the valences of space.

2

In Greece, there was a time when space and place so overlapped that they were almost indistinct. The immensity of this great emptiness was evident enough for it to remain uncertain as to how place could be displayed. The Greeks guessed at the world but were dismayed at its seemingly endless size. After all, is not The Odyssey but a voyage through this indefinite space? Ulysses names nothing other than his own name, which is not yet “someone.” While keeping up the challenge, he reveals his real name to Polyphemus, and in return incurs the wrath of Poseidon, master of the watery depths, lord of the smoothest of all spaces: that which devours all human pretensions. The Greeks had yet to name these sites so that they might metamorphose into places. A mythology had yet to be created and its tale (mythos) was yet to extend and be charted out. Prometheus had yet to explore and defy the limits of the world as the Argonauts did; Europa had yet to be abducted, prompting her brothers to search all four corners of the Mediterranean for her; and Io, woman and heifer, had yet to tread the earth of Greece, Caucasus, and Egypt so that a measurement of space could begin to emerge in the psychological landscape.

Space was initially appropriated through mythology. For navigators and travellers, these stories are translated into a particular form: the “voyage.” Sailors learn a list of its toponyms by heart. These are the stopovers that take them to their destination. In the mind of the navigators there is no geometric shape, and no cartographic representation of the world. They are not concerned with transposing these onto paper or bringing them to scale. Space is a straight line, a route that stretches out before them and traces the floating tune of a row of toponyms. This chant, that is repeated as one would recite a section of an epic poem, fills the space. It is like a phrase, extracted from a vast text that charts the universe of the gods. The idea of place would come later to Koine Greek. It would inform the genre of the Greek periegesis, of which many samples are immortalized in the history books. There is, for example, the periegesis written by Hecataeus of Miletus, which is the oldest recorded, as well as Dionysius of Alexandria’s, which was translated into Latin by Avicenna. The word periegesis comes from the Greek περιήγησις, a derivation of περιηγέομαι, “navigating around.” There are in fact two senses to the
word. Certainly, it suggests a “journey around,” but it also emphasizes the intonation on the second-to-last syllable. The *periegesis* is at once a description of the lived world and a reflection on the rhythm of the phrase. It combines displacement in space and a reflection on language. It explores the connection between language and the physical world. It is anchored in space rather than place. Ancient voyages and *periegeses* are not treatises on geography. As François Hartog wrote:

> It seems that in the third century BC, Eratosthenes introduced us to the term *geographos*, as a person who illustrates or describes the earth, the author of a treatise or a cartographer. Prior to that, we spoke of the “geographer,” author of a “tour” or a “trail” through the lived world. (Hartog 1996, 96)

Would it be erroneous to associate the invention of geography and mapping with the transition from a projection into space to an entry into place? The beginnings of mapping bear witness to a truly material expansion. If it represents the iconic growth of a world, which precedes its appropriation by the mind, it may also refer to a concrete situation: colonization, which, among other things, the Greeks didn’t miss an opportunity to try their hand at.

Place and the map came first, then territory, and finally the nation, which made borders and identities sacred. Here lies another decade of the rosary, which has been recited throughout human history. It connects ancient Greece with the modern Western world, and indeed the whole world. Today the gods are dead, and if any remain they are no longer those of the past. Nations have since emerged; the maps, which outline the contours of the states, remain. Cartography has evolved, more or less. Mercator has succeeded Eratosthenes and Ptolemy. Four centuries after Mercator, Arno Peters, the iconoclastic historian, described the shortcomings of his predecessor’s projection and de-centred the world in the direction of the southern hemisphere. It took only three more decades for Brian McClendon to pour the world into Google Earth (in 2005) and for digital geography to cover the planet with a new layer of supposed objectivity: the thickest, and the most devious, of all. The striations have multiplied, but what is still cruelly lacking is a consideration of space and the text that he founded, and which, in return, proposes a poetic alternative. It has been a long while since, based on the model of the voyage—the *periegesis*—space ceased to spin a sentence which,

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2 Where not differently indicated, all the translations are by Eleanor Guistina Prudence Drage.
unwinding like a coil, expresses both the world and a narrative order that does it justice. By way of the map and the toponyms that illustrate it, places eventually endorsed the idea of planes and surfaces while naturalizing their static extension. Maps are full of geometric forms and solidified symbols, which the human eye is now well accustomed to. We move between places, if we can and want to, but as far as points of reference are concerned they are expected to remain fixed.

Can the voyage and the periegesis survive at a time when the structural gridlines of place would have us forget that space exists? Contemporary artists are striving to undo the conventional map of the world so that they might arrange the contours of countries according to a new order. In his 1975 work Atlas, Marcel Broodthaers places the shape of each of the states onto a white page, all reduced to an equivalent size and displayed in rows of horizontal lines. He inspired the work of two German visual artists: Kirsten Pieroth’s Weltkarte I and Weltkarte II (2003) (Westphal 2016, 208), and Antonia Hirsch’s World Map Project: Equal Countries A–Z (2006). In these works, the voyage flows into a kind of sentence, one where places have been threaded together in an order that is so overly strict (orthogonal or alphabetical, and always linear) that it ultimately reveals the absurdity of cartographic convention. The alphabetical arrangement, though suggesting a dictionary rather than poetry, restores at least the link between voyage and text.

Are there still more voyages to be made in an imagined geography? Isolari, the Renaissance atlas of the islands of ancient times, some of which are fictitious, rises from the depths of memory like bubbles in a glass of champagne. The Isolari provided lists of islands and islets, as Dionysius of Alexandria’s stories did with the enchanted cities of Greek mythology and travel. However, there is no need to search the folds of a distant past, limited to the Renaissance and the early modern age, like the Isolari. Closer to the present day, we can look to Italo Calvino, explorer of the alternative spaces of the modern world that play host to literature’s great imaginary expanses. The year 1972 was Calvino’s. Among his many projects was a periodical aimed at the common public. The tone needed to be lightweight, the format friendly, and the content accessible to a wide readership. Though the magazine never came to fruition, Calvino did not give up. The same year that his journal for the common public failed, his short story “Il nome, il naso” [“The Name, the Nose”] was published in the inaugural Italian issue of the adult magazine Playboy. The story was
later republished in *Sotto il sole giaguaro* [*Under the Jaguar Sun*] (Calvino 1986). In November, Calvino attended a luncheon with members of the Oulipo, among them Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec. Perhaps they went for a picnic—the story does not say. One certain thing is that, in 1972, Calvino published *Le città invisibili* [*Invisible Cities*].

In its original version, this little book is just over one hundred and sixty pages, but it confronts an immense task. It recounts a lengthy dialogue between two famous interlocutors, Kublai Khan and Marco Polo. The work reproduces fifty-five fragments of this dialogue, divided into eleven categories, of which the city is the taxonomic criterion: “The City and Desire,” “The City and the Signs,” “The City and the Name,” etc. More accurately still, these fragments are part of Marco Polo’s description of the cities in Kublai Khan’s empire. They form a series of *mises en abyme*, micro-narratives framed by excerpts from the dialogue that bring the government and the merchant closer to one another. To be rational, the structure of the book becomes elusive, like one of the lines that Deleuze and Guattari evoke during their extensive géophilosophie. Or perhaps, like the city of Fedora, as described by Marco Polo, where every room in the city’s metal buildings contains a crystal globe showing, “a blue city, the model of a different Fedora” (Calvino 1974, 32). The *Invisible Cities* takes place in an open-air version of the Chinese Emperor’s palace. The setting was inspired by *Il Milione*, “as to a fantastic and exotic setting,” and to Coleridge, Kafka, and Buzzati. In Calvino’s words, these works: “become imaginary continents in which other literary works will find their space; ‘elsewhere’ continents, not that we can say that ‘elsewhere’ no longer exists, and the whole world tends to level out” (Calvino 1993, viii).

While the world is subject to the movement of globalization, which, as with the politics of space, poses a threat to homogeneous cultures, literature and poetry preserve the integrity of space. In this case, the intertextual series at which Calvino hinted strongly evokes the voyages of the past—which, as discussed above, are minimal narrative concatenations drawn up in a space that is both open and hostile to any form of standardization.

There is a melancholy aspect in the attitude of Kublai Khan that comes from the observation that the human condition, even in the lofty form inherited by the Chinese Emperor, is powerless to address the reality of the world. This feeling of impotence and emptiness “comes over us at evening, with the odor of the elephants after the rain” (Calvino 1974, 5). Only the Venetian traveller can ease the pain of the emperor: “Only in Marco Polo’s accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls
and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites’ gnawing” (Calvino 1974, 5–6).

The vastness of space unfolds in Kublai Khan’s imagination, whose empire is the whole world, because, of course, there is nothing outside of it. There, in the claim of Kublai Khan, lies a fundamental misunderstanding. A better understanding of his Empire is a reasonable challenge; but absolute knowledge of it could only be illusory. However, Kublai Khan aims for the absolute, the sovereign standpoint that he embodies in all of its jaded splendour. Marco Polo’s craft lies in his ability to reveal the alternative to this pretence, so that Kublai Khan accepts the enigma of the world and resolves to live in a space whose folds, re-folds, and multiple dimensions are beyond measure—as embodied by Calvino’s book, which itself reflects their intellectual adventure. The author understood this because it is, “a polyhedron shaped book, with conclusions almost everywhere, written all along its edges” (Calvino 1993, x). The narration, like space, is deeply rhizomatic. It is made of words that follow each other however it is possible, in an order without hierarchy. As for conclusions, they are everywhere, and not necessarily where we expect to find them, where place keeps its treasures. They emerge at random from the pages. They come as images from the past of the city of Zaira: “The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows …” (Calvino 1974, 11). We must know how to glean this information and move beyond it. For Kublai Khan, visiting the space of the empire does not constitute an act of authority—only humility will allow him to penetrate deeper into the essence of the world, located somewhere in the palm of the hand, between the line of narration and the life line, the corner of a window or the edge of a pavement. In other words, he must penetrate the intimate dimension of space to escape the disappointment of place. This need leads to another: the escape from toponymic rigours to go beyond the name. Otherwise, as Marco Polo says, “while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts” (Calvino 1974, 14). This would not be enough. If there were total equivalence between the word and the realeme, the former could become the referent of place and its substance. Kublai Khan could design an abstract description and all Marco Polo would have to do is find a city that corresponds to it. Imagination and space would match perfectly—and yet, space is infinitely richer than even the most vivid of human imaginations. As the Venetian says, “I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be
The Challenge of Invisible Cities

real” (Calvino 1974, 69). Place and map are by definition credible; the truth of space lies elsewhere. Perhaps it can be found nestled in the patterns of a carpet glimpsed in Eudossia or on the surface of the chessboard around which the emperor and the traveller play an absentminded game. Perhaps the truth of space hides in the pathways of the Chinese Emperor’s hanging gardens, which, like the garden of forking paths in Jorge Luis Borges’s famous story, are “a mental space” (Calvino 1974, 103). Ultimately, perhaps the space of the empire is equivalent to the places where the empire was victorious in battle, when these are reduced to their essence, “nothingness …” (Calvino 1974, 123). The zero degree of place would be the starting point of a space made in the mind and the imagination. Thus, the space of the empire escapes from the clutches of place.

The voyage, in the Greek sense of the term, that is traced by Marco Polo as he strings together sentences and toponyms in poetic sounds, results in an extraordinary meditation on space. No map can bear witness to this space that escapes any sort of cantonment. This is explored somewhat in “Il viandante sulla mappa” [“The Traveller in the Map”], one of the texts collected in Collezione di sabbia [Collection of Sand] (1984), where Calvino explains this process:

The simplest form of a map isn’t the one that today appears as the most natural: the map which represents the surface of the Earth as seen by an extra-terrestrial eye. The first need of fixing places on a map is linked to the journey: it’s the reminder of a series of steps, the layout of an itinerary. It’s a linear image, which can only be drawn on a long paper scroll. (Calvino 1994, 21)

From the voyage, a sentence emerges, unfolding across place, boundary, and atlas. Rather than to Chinese painting, Calvino’s text refers to Peutinger’s Tabula, which traces a route from the point of view of the pilgrim, whose gaze is fixed on the horizon and the geographical object of their quest. The writer nonetheless evokes a nineteen-metre-long seventeenth-century Japanese roll, which depicts a painted route between Tokyo and Kyoto: “The Japanese scroll invites us to identify ourselves with the invisible traveller, to walk that road bend after bend, to climb up and down bridges and the hills” (Calvino 1994, 22).

What Marco Polo says in the Emperor’s garden is incompatible with traditional cartographic discourse. The Venetian merchant recounts a
voyage by un-scrolling the image of the world, as a Chinese or Japanese painter would open the scroll upon which their work is painted. Here lies the world, but it is never visible immediately. As the story unfolds, it becomes what we make of it—just one of many possible narratives, because the world is much broader than the sentence that endeavours to ascertain it. After all, Calvinian cities are destined to remain invisible. No symbol will be right for them, no diktat of the real, no word, and no absolutist measure. This is how they persist. Their sounds are feminine, and they inspired two women, among many others. One was born in Pakistan in the year following the publication of *Invisible Cities*, the other in Brazil the year before the book's release.

In *Kartography* (2002), Kamila Shamsie warns of the dangers posed by the kind of coercion raised by Marco Polo’s writings. The novel pits the two young protagonists’ styles of cartography against each other; both Raheen and Karim obsessively create a map of their city, Karachi.

Over the course of the novel, Raheen tries to deter Karim; for her, his map is too topographically controlled, violating the spirit of the place, namely the true nature of Karachi’s space. At university, Raheen writes a pastiche of Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* as an exercise in comparative literature. As Marco Polo did before her, she paints a portrait of a city, Zytrow, whose streets are anonymous and yet memorable because they can be distinguished by the intimate memories they hold, memories that the visitor can recover, such as a great leap into the air:

But if you leave Zytrow and forget its magic, you’ll start listening to the poison of those who say all streets must have names. You’ll join in the task of making travel easier for foreign travellers. And one by one, as you ink your map, they disappear: the fruit seller, the ghosts, the friends you never said goodbye to. When the map is nearly done the cartographers begin to celebrate. They’ll say there’s only one street remaining that needs a name. As they write the name and complete the map, someone tells you: before this, the inhabitants of Zytrow referred to it as the street where the boy leapt an incredible leap. (Shamsie 2002, 117)

The same concern troubles the work of Rosana Ricalde. Her series, *As Cidades Invisíveis*, was carried out between 2007 and 2008, and depicts the cities that are invisible to her. The series hangs on the walls of museums and galleries, like the hanging gardens of Kublai Khan’s palace. Looking from a distance, a first glance gives the viewers the sense that they are trying to discern a map of Athens, New York, Barcelona, Paris, Lisbon, Rio de Janeiro, and a few other cities. In fact, Rosana Ricalde’s invisible cities play with the map; they play with the very meaning of the
map as they make themselves visible, while the symbolic importance of
the map remains almost intact; thus, for the Eixample district of
Barcelona, its distinctive “chessboard” grid, designed in 1859 by the great
urban planner Ildefonso Cerdá, is still perfectly recognizable. As soon as
we approach the maps, we realize that the mimetic relationship between
the maps and the cities that are featured is the result of the use of collage.
Excerpts of the various translations of Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, including
the Spanish and Portuguese versions, have been cut out to form the main
arteries of the city. The blank canvas is devoted to Calvino’s text; on the
white paper, there is nothing besides it. As Guillaume Monsaingeon has
commented in the catalogue of the exhibition in Toulon where three of
Ricalde’s “invisible cities” were exhibited:

> With this extremely fragile work, Rosana Ricalde places herself at the
antipodes of traditional affirmative cartography. These suddenly silent and
gloomy metropoles ask more questions than they give answers. Even
even though unreadable, the black words coming out of *Invisible Cities* seem
to have magic powers that blur all certitudes. (Monsaingeon 2013, 160)

The danger of the map is in its emphasis on detail. For his part, Calvino’s
Kublai Khan uses an atlas—the most comprehensive one of all. It contains
maps of cities and details of their streets; it shows the world that we live
in. However, this is all very ordinary. It also catalogues the cities of the
future (Mexico City, New York) and the lost cities (Ur, Carthage); better
yet, it evokes utopias and dystopias. The cities that the atlas restores all
have a form because each form corresponds with a city, wherever in time
it is situated. However, Marco Polo is worried by the final pages of the
atlas as they forecast shapeless cities like Los Angeles and Kyoto-Osaka.3
Could it be that place had exhausted all geometric combinations? That
would be hell. There are two options for the Venetian, and as in all things
he summarizes them in his own way: accept disaster or, “seek and learn to
recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then
make them endure, give them space” (Calvino 1974, 165). To embrace and
create space over the long term is precisely the best way to break away

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3 The conurbation includes a third city: Kobe. While working for *Il Corriere della
Sera*, Calvino travelled to Kyoto in November 1976. His visit provided him with
material for his article “L’amara ricchezza delle ville di Kyoto” [“The Bitter
Wealth of the Villas in Kyoto”] (Calvino 1976). Several years later, Calvino
looked back at his journey in a remastered format in *Collection of Sand*. For a
description of the Zen garden of Kyoto’s Ryoan-Ji temple see Calvino (1983).
from this hellish inevitability. It would be the ultimate form of resignation, which would crown the successful attempt at exhausting a place—a place in Paris, as in a Perec’s work (Perec 1982).

The memory of Calvino’s masterly lesson spans the contemporary artistic landscape. In 2001, Fosco and Donatello Dubini adapted to the screen Ella Maillart and Annemarie Schwarzenbach’s road trip in a Ford Cabriolet to the remote valley of Kafiristan in the Hindu Kush, northeastern Afghanistan. Its name, meaning “Land of Infidels,” derives from the fact that the region only converted to Islam at the end of the nineteenth century, having until that time remained polytheist. According to Maillart, Kafiristan was one of the planet’s last remaining _terrae incognitae_—a relative concept, since this is a matter of perspective. The two women would fail, since the Second World War broke out when they were in Kabul, interrupting their _Reise nach Kafiristan_ [Journey to Kafiristan], which is also the title of the film. Produced and directed by the Dubini brothers, the film brings to the screen an odyssey through part of Europe and Asia (Simplon, the Balkans, Turkey, Armenia, Iran, and Afghanistan). It also illustrates the spiritual journeys of Maillart and Schwarzenbach. During the war, in the United States, Schwarzenbach gets close to Erika and Klaus Mann before meeting Carson McCullers, who falls in love with her, and before being detained in an asylum, from which she manages to escape. Places are hostile. They are operated by the code of men and are subject to war and imprisonment. Only space remains, which must be discovered and uncovered, like the layers of convention under which lies the human being and one’s true nature. The Dubini brothers’ film abounds in quotations from the novels written by the two travellers (Maillart 1948; Schwarzenbach 2000). Their words seem to echo the dialogue between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, although in a sense they even anticipate it—after all, what is left of a linear chronology in rediscovered space? Maillart does not flee, as she confesses to Schwarzenbach: “What you call escape

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4 Kafiristan is present-day Nouristan. It became known as the “Land of the Enlightened” after its population was forced to convert to Islam in 1896. The site was chosen by Rudyard Kipling as the setting for “The Man Who Would Be King” (Kipling 1888).

5 Annemarie Schwarzenbach is a well-established figure in contemporary literature. For example, she appears several times in Mathias Énard’s novel, _Boussole_ [Compass] (Énard 2015).
is my only getaway” (Dubini and Dubini 2001). We leave places at their saturation point in search of an exit towards a space of freedom and fulfilment of the subject. Schwarzenbach shares this philosophy, which she follows through to its extreme consequences. She too is exposed to a society which seeks to curb her aspirations—she belongs to a social elite that she despises; her sexuality diverges from the norms of the age; she is often high in an artificial paradise. Schwarzenbach rewrites the world, drawing on fragments of texts which she gathers at random on her voyage: “While I was starting to decipher secret addresses, to read traces and rename my discoveries, at the same time it felt to me that my comprehension of human language was fading” (Dubini and Dubini 2001). But she also knows, “that [her] language cannot be understood” (Dubini and Dubini 2001).

The Dubini brothers’ film is astonishing because it embraces an underlying orientalist vision. It even emphasizes the effect that this vision has, as if to mock stereotypes and foster a better understanding of the psychological landscape that it resonates with, that is, the psyche of the two Swiss travellers who are dazzled by their adventure. The Journey to Kafiristan was shot in a series of places that ideally express the concept of the wondrous Orient: Bukhara and Samarkand in Uzbekistan, and Petra and Aqaba in Jordan. Tehran, where Schwarzenbach was supposed to find a diplomat husband, was nothing like the great city that it had been in the 1930s; neither has it anything to do with the metropolis of Abbas Kiarostami that any present film director keeps in a corner of their memory. The Dubini brothers’ almost-vacant Tehran rests somewhere between Bukhara and Samarkand, its mosques a gleaming blue, as in a typical Western dream of the East. The two directors go even further; they get straight to the heart of Calvinian space. Before the Turkish border, we visit Ottavia, the invisible city whose description by Marco Polo is recalled by Schwarzenbach. In Persia we travel around Zora. In Afghanistan, it is Euphemia and Calvino’s texts that are alluded to (Dubini and Dubini 2001), like ghosts that we cannot say have already been born. Where one border ends another begins, opening up the way for a cohort of obstacles, inspiring a conversation with other women travellers.

Maillart: We are almost getting to the border.
Schwarzenbach: Which border? Borders exist only on maps. Yet I would like to cross them … With you.
Maillart: We have already crossed the border.
Schwarzenbach: I had thought about it. The border … Within … The border should be tread within, not on the map. (Dubini and Dubini 2001)
For any person more or less physically able to move about, it is above all their psychological landscape that is crisscrossed by borders. In the Dubini brothers’ film, Maillart and Schwarzenbach know this all too well, as they probably did in “real life,” but they need to make absolutely sure of it. The desert regions of Central Asia were for them the ideal laboratory for this intimate experience. In Hong Kong, after reading Italo Calvino, someone has come to a similar conclusion. He is aware that there exists “a lover’s inner topography” (Kai-cheung 2011, 45). He also knows that borders are as relative the Möbius strip:

To be inside a place means at the same time that you are outside other places, and vice versa. In other words, all outsides are a form of being inside and all insides are a form of being outside. There is no absolute inside, nor is there an absolute outside. From this perspective, the fixing of boundaries is a way of making a place a place. Since there is no place on earth that has an absolute existence, all places (or all human understanding of places) are areas within boundaries, and power interprets areas as territories with boundaries. (Kai-cheung 2011, 20)

The author of these reflections is Dung Kai-cheung (Dong Qizhang in Mandarin Chinese), a talented comparatist scholar, prolific novelist of the younger generation (born in 1967), and promoter of literary postmodernism. In 1997, he published *Dituji yi ge xiangxiang de chengshi de kaoguxue* in Taipei. A new edition of the novel was published in 2011 in an English version the author contributed to as *Atlas: the Archaeology of an Imaginary City*. It is an obvious homage to Calvino, though *a fortiori* the subtitle refers equally to Michel Foucault, given that one of the chapters is titled “Heterotopia.” *Atlas* is an astonishing book, divided into four parts: “Theory,” “The City,” “Streets,” and “Signs.” It blithely mixes theory and fiction and multiplies the ways of approach to

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6 This homage seems even more evident in his *V cheng fansheng lu* [Visible Cities: A Chronicle of the Splendour of V City] (Kai-cheung 1998). But in reality, only the novel’s title has a Calvinian echo, as David Der-wei Wang explains. In his excellent article he also adds: “[Visible Cities] draws its inspiration from *Dongjing meng Hua lu* (東京夢華錄, Record of Dreaming of Hua in the Eastern Capital) by the Southern Song loyalist Meng Yuanlao, and re-works it to refer to the grandeur that the Hong Kong in Visible Cities once experienced” (Der-wei Wang 2011, 81).
the city of Victoria, which is in fact Hong Kong. Its relationship to the realeme is at times close, at others distended. Dung Kai-cheung leads his interlocutor-reader, a kind of Kublai Khan who has become suddenly anonymous, through a new space, which frees itself with an attitude of playful seriousness—the combination of words is not an exaggeration here—towards the constraints of places of reference. The initial section dedicated to theory consists of a delightful anthology of topical categories ranging from Counterplace to Omnitopia and Misplace, to Supertopia and even Transtopia, to name just a few. It is as if Calvino’s Eutropia had become Unitopia, Zenobia’s Nonplace, etc. Not without charm, this parody of Foucault, Marc Augé, and others is a substitute for the poetry of Invisible Cities. However, its resistance to the map remains steadfast:

No place can transcend itself to attain an eternal and absolute state … Its respective self-affirmation may end up as a stale convention. This is the reason that modern maps of high precision lack imagination. (Kai-cheung 2011, 6)

If we imagined Kublai Khan and Marco Polo surrounded by skyscrapers in Hong Kong Park, engaged in quiet conversation, we would have no difficulty in knowing that it was they who had spoken these words. As for the protagonists of Calvino’s novel, what remains is to envisage a cartography of the imaginary which explores the stretches of freedom that develop in the margins of the code. Dung’s elaboration evokes the strategy of re-reading the map employed by Bishop Simeone Volonteri in 1866, when he drew up the San-on district, which (certainly7) exists in the referential universe. Dung used it to support the theory of the Antiplace, which he lent the Bishop (who did not ask for so much). For practical purposes, we will define the “anti-place” as a place whose conditions are diametrically opposed, as the prelate would have demonstrated, drawing on the supposed example of two sites located in Hong Kong. This new cartography is developed—with all due respect to the Emperor of China—by way of a reflection on the limits of power, “for maps are not just a depiction, record, or symbol of power but the actual execution of power itself” (Kai-cheung 2011, 16). By way of a pastiche that makes for an equally pleasing imitation of the style of an academic paper as of a colonial report, Dung Kai-cheung sings with a truthful heart a hymn to the creation of fictional spaces, which he knows full well will triumph over all

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7 The map drafted by Simeone Volonteri is actually of the district of San-on (Volonteri 1866).
limitations, as space overcomes the artifices of place. His faith in art knows no bounds:

Fiction is the essential character of Victoria and even of all cities, and city maps are by necessity novels expanding, altering, embellishing, and repudiating themselves. (Kai-cheung 2011, 56)

Thus, the novel would be the perfect map. However, whatever the perfect map is, it can be nothing if it does not contain the beginning of all voyages and the outcome of any sentence that the human mind can conceive. That is why the map is doomed not to amount to much. Too attached to place, it only lets us guess at the eternally gaping space that the imagination has safeguarded from innumerable assaults of power. That is probably the main lesson to draw from the long conversation between the most famous merchant of Venice, city of merchants, and the Chinese Emperor, a man for whom power itself had become a component of the imagination. In the past twenty years or so, invisible cities have mushroomed across the surface of the globe—certainly in literature and the arts, and maybe even a little above the surface, or a little below. Maps have trouble following this frenzied sarabande. Ultimately, as Dung Kai-cheung wisely notes, “this is evidence that, in the mimetic world of maps, a place will inevitably find its counterpart in another, parallel space” (Kai-cheung 2011, 4). Every place will find its location in a parallel space. Is this also true for Hong Kong? In 1994, while living in Tangier, where the Mediterranean Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean, the remarkable Guatemalan writer Rodrigo Rey Rosa wrote Lo que soñó Sebastián [What Sebastian Dreamt]. Somewhere near Punta Caracol, deep in the tropical forest of Peten, Sebastián is daydreaming. Is Punta Caracol a non-place, given that it does not exist on maps of Guatemala? No—rather, it is an anti-space. “The Mayan Hong Kong. Isn’t it the way they call it?” (Rey Rosa 2015, 36). It seems that Mayan maps were as interesting as those of their neighbours, the Aztecs. Their maps tell fabulous stories. The sentence continues, and the voyage with it.

Works Cited


CHAPTER TWO

HAUNTED CARTOGRAPHIES:
TOWARDS A POSTCOLONIAL
“GYNEALOGY” OF MAPMAKING

LAURA LO PRESTI

Cartographic Anxieties

A woman is sitting on a chair at a table with a sewing machine. At a closer view, the table is covered by several maps of the former British colonies, published in different years and at different scales. After moments of deep silence, the sewing machine is turned on and it starts to stitch the land of Ireland onto the map of the United Kingdom. Then it goes further on, suturing the borders of Nigeria, the West Indies, and Hong Kong.

The stitching of the sewing machine follows a regular progression, appearing like a person wondering where to go, and setting the cadence for a sort of narration. Just at the moment in which I am accustomed to the routine of the process, the fast but ordered rhythm turns into a convulsion. Suddenly, the machine becomes increasingly faster, stitching the maps frenetically until it drills and erases the surface of the paper. A real-time topography of borders and conquests comes to life and simultaneously dies, agitated by the blows of the household machine, confirming that each drawn line is historically and materially a mark of subjugation and annihilation. The disfigured maps of the British Empire are finally stitched into an Atlas, a chaotic frame that not only shows performative destruction but also consists of it.